

1990.62.1

View of an Italian Port

Early 1660s

Oil on canvas, 48 x 59.5 (18 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 23 $\frac{3}{4}$)

Gift (Partial and Promised) of Robert H. and Clarice Smith,
in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery
of Art

Inscriptions

At lower right: *Berchem*

Technical Notes: The support, a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric, is loosely woven of irregularly spun threads. Part of the original tacking margins were retained at the time of lining and incorporated into the picture plane, slightly expanding the dimensions on all four sides. Lining has re-inforced the weave texture.

Paint is applied over an off-white ground in thin opaque layers worked wet into dry. Minor losses are confined to the edges. The upper right corner of the sky is abraded, as are the edges. No treatment has been undertaken at the National Gallery.

Provenance: Probably J. van Lanschot, Leiden, by 1753.¹ M. van Leyden, Amsterdam; (sale, A. Paillet and H. Delaroché, Paris, 10 September 1804, no. 8);² M. La Roche. John Parke, Esq., London; (sale, Peter Coxe, London, 8 May 1812, no. 37). (John Smith, London); John Webb, Esq., London. Chevalier Erard, Château de la Muette; (sale, Lacoste and Henry, Paris, 7 August 1832, no. 62);³ A. N. Pérignon, Paris. Jonkheer Johan Steengracht van Oostcapelle, The Hague; (sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, 9 June 1913, no. 4); Mr. Boyer.⁴ By inheritance from the grandfather of the 9 April 1990 anonymous seller; (sale, Adar Picard Tajan, Paris, 9 April 1990, no. 82); Robert H. and Clarice Smith, Washington.

Exhibited: Washington 1991.

IN THIS IDYLIC SCENE Berchem captures both the beauty of the Italian landscape and the cool, crystalline light that imbues it with its distinctive atmospheric quality.⁵ Situated against a backdrop of towering cliffs that drop straight down to the calm waters below, the exotic character of this harbor setting is defined not by buildings or wharfs, but by the various types of figures that have come together at the water's edge. The most prominent of these is the elegant couple who, fresh from the hunt, sit astride their steeds. Dressed in wide-brimmed hats with flowing feathers, the couple talk to a standing gentleman while the woman's falcon airs its wings. The gentleman holding his staff is probably the keeper of the hunting dogs who are seen mingling, two of them being held by a young assistant in the lower left. What has brought them to the harbor is not certain, but they may well be awaiting a ferry

to transport them either to one of the ships anchored in deeper water or to the far shore. Behind them two wide-bottomed ferries are already loaded with cargo. In the one filled with cattle, two figures wrestle a recalcitrant goat along a gangplank, while before the other ferry two orientals stand and talk, while a third sits, waiting for the boat to push off. Also waiting for a ride is a shepherd who sits in the right foreground with a cow and some sheep.

Although no documentary evidence exists that proves that Berchem actually visited Italy, it seems probable that he traveled there sometime between 1653 and 1656.⁶ Otherwise, without firsthand experience, it is virtually inconceivable that he could have captured with seeming effortlessness the special light and character of this faraway land. While *View of an Italian Port* does not represent an identifiable location, such specifics as the characteristic Italian ship anchored off the shore, with its long red oars stretching to either side, point to Berchem's careful observation of what, for a Dutchman, was an unusual form of a ship. Just where Berchem might have seen such cliffs is not known, but similar formations surmounted by large buildings appear in the background of a number of his paintings.⁷

As with most of his Italianate paintings, Berchem executed *View of an Italian Port* in the Netherlands, probably in the early 1660s.⁸ He painted for a Dutch clientele eager for idealized views of the Italian landscape. Judging from the various copies of this painting, his scene struck a responsive chord.⁹ Its qualities were greatly admired in the mid-eighteenth century, when the image was engraved by A. Delfos,¹⁰ and in the early nineteenth century, when the first written descriptions of it are known. In the famous sale of Chevalier Erard in 1831, for example, the catalogue entry reads in part: "On admire dans ce tableau... tout le goût, tout l'esprit du célèbre Berchem. La composition en est bien ordonnée, les groupes en sont disposés et variés avec beaucoup d'intelligence; l'air circule partout, la dégradation des plans est parfaite. L'exécution, la conservation ne laissent rien à désirer."¹¹

The stylistic characteristic that most compellingly places this painting in the 1660s is its classicism, which stems from the strong horizontal and vertical accents in the landscape, and from the clear, crystalline light. Also consistent with this date is the fluidity of the handling of the paint and the elegance of the couple on horseback. A comparison of *View of an Italian Port* to another harbor scene by Berchem, *Mediterranean Coast Scene with Crab Fishermen* (fig. 1), datable to 1658,¹² demonstrates the evolution in style



Fig. 1. Nicolaes Pietersz. Berchem, *Coastal Scene with Crab Catchers*, c. 1658, oil on canvas, York City Art Gallery, presented by F.D. Lycett Green, Esq., through the National Art-Collections Fund



Fig. 2. Nicolaes Pietersz. Berchem, *Wild Boar Hunt*, 1659, oil on canvas, The Hague, Mauritshuis

that Berchem's work underwent between the late 1650s and early 1660s. Here one encounters a comparable contrast between foreground figures and a distant vista of cliffs across a body of water, but the foreground and background elements are not as closely integrated. Not only are distinctions of light and color more pronounced, but also the careful interplay of horizontals, verticals, and diagonals found in *View of an Italian Port* have not been so

subtly developed. Another comparison with this work is Berchem's *Wild Boar Hunt* (fig. 2), signed and dated 1659, where a similar grouping of figures on horseback occurs. While the position of the white horse in both paintings is virtually identical, the horse in the National Gallery's painting is somewhat more schematically rendered, which is characteristic of Berchem's style of the 1660s.¹³

Notes

1. Van Lanschot is identified by means of a reproductive print of the painting executed by A. Delfos in 1753. As Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann has noted, it is possible that the painting in question is one of the copies after *View of an Italian Port* (see note 9).

2. An annotated copy of the sale catalogue at the RKD indicates that the sale took place on 15 November 1804 rather than the 10 September date printed on the title page. Reasons for this change of date were not stated. The same annotated catalogue also states that the picture fetched Fr 4,800 when it was purchased by Mr. La Roche.

3. This sale, originally scheduled for 23 April 1832, was moved to 7 August of the same year.

4. An annotated copy of the auction catalogue housed at the NGA library notes that Boyer purchased the picture for Fr 7,900.

5. I would like to thank Yonna Yapou for sharing with me the research she did on this painting while it was in the possession of Mr. and Mrs. Smith.

6. See Biography.

7. Such cliffs have been associated with the port of Genoa, as in *The Old Port of Genoa*, Wallace Collection, London [see repro. in Wallace Collection 1992, 26, no. P25], but at the very best they are fanciful evocations of actual formations.

8. This date is also suggested by Schaar 1958, 86.

9. Copies and versions include: Collection of the Duke of Devonshire, Chatsworth; possibly sale, Paris, 1853; sale, Artaria and others, Vienna, 12 January 1886, no. 8; and possibly sale, P. van den Bogaerde, Amsterdam, 16 March 1778, no. 3.

10. For a discussion of the print, see Hollstein 1949–, 1: 271, no. 111. It is described as a "Harbour, on the right nobleman and lady on horseback—oblong format."

11. Erard 1831, 83.

12. See Utrecht 1965, 158–159, cat. 81; and Blankert 1978a, 158–159, cat. 81.

13. The same white horse appears in Berchem's *A Hawking Party Halting at a Farrier's Shop*, formerly in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin, reproduced in Staatliche Museen, Berlin 1932, cat. 896 (see Smith 1829–1842, 5: 99, cat. 310), and in a related drawing in the British Museum, London, inv. 1895.9.15.1112 [see Hind 1926, 3: 33–34, no. 34, pl. xviii].

References

- 1829–1842 Smith, 5 (1834): 47, no. 137.
 1854–1857 Waagen, 2 (1854): 95.
 1907–1927 HdG, 9 (1926): 80, no. 107.
 1958 Schaar: 58.



Nicolaes Pietersz. Berchem, *View of an Italian Port*, 1690.62.1